TEXTURES
ONLINE PLATFORM FOR INTERWEAVING PERFORMANCE CULTURES

All under one sky

Lydia Haustein, 20 December 2012

Did contemporary art revive historical thinking, which was once deeply rooted in China but almost extinguished by the Cultural Revolution? As art weaves a dynamic texture of traditional patterns, it does not, however, exhaust them in simply recollecting historical subjects.

China is changing the world. Day by day now, the country usurps the United States' claim to global leadership. China succeeded in all but destroying traditional culture with its notorious Cultural Revolution by using drastic political visual campaigns. However, today, an immense disorientation has set in in the wake of an unstoppable transformation of that country's social reality. In particular, it is art that reflects the outcome of this transformation, taking on a new face almost every day.

In responding to the hypermodern rapidity overrunning China's material past, artists increasingly ask questions about what is *Chinese* in Chinese art. For example, just take architectural heritage: more building stock has been destroyed by the government in the past ten years than between 1949 and the end of the Cultural Revolution.

«China, I love you!»

The vanishing of traditional lifeworlds is accompanied by a permanent redefinition of what has been lost. Wang Qingsong monumentalises the outrageous momentum of a new 'religiosity' in stupendous large-scale installations. Countless devout singers of patriotic communist songs perfectly match the trend toward religious devotion. Since the singing of Mao's *red songs* was encouraged by the communist party on occasion of its 90th birthday, the parks resound with choirs of hundreds of people chanting "China, I love you!" in perfectly nostalgic solidarity.

However, the youngest generation—heirs to a 4,000-year-old culture—are in search of an identity more in tune with the promises conveyed in the visual language of lifestyle advertisements that, paradoxically, are charged with the quasi-religious powers of old myths. While these iconographies weaken the boundaries between Sinicisation, retraditionalisation and nationalism, the government uses the explosive powers of popular

culture to reinforce its own agenda. A commercial advertisement of a 'Western' or capitalist character is now being exploited in support of the government's strategic message of *Chineseness*.

Simultaneously and paradoxically, in the course of this renaissance of traditions, the government purges school textbooks of Mao's pictures, or 'modernises' historic jargons of propaganda. For many years, artists like Zhang Dali are commenting on this tinkering with images, while at the same time debunking fictitious hero-myths that serve the pervasive forces of multinational capitalism as much as they fit the agenda of the Chinese government's most recent five-year plan. Both share a pragmatic interest in the build-up of powerful creative industries designed to be simultaneously Chinese and international. From now until 2015, the government plans to build more than 1,000 museums. There are presently more than 3,200 museums as well as thousands of galleries throughout the country. *Soft power* has become the buzzword of cultural diplomacy.

Subtle distinctions

China's most famous blogger is Han Han, who is celebrated by many users as a superstar—a new Lu Xun. He sees the internet with its more than 500 million users as the most important stage for free culture in China. According to him art owes its speedy linkage with "non-local cultures" (i.e. the global arts scene) exclusively to the new media. Thus, he concludes that the contemporary art history of China is about as old as the digital age.

The aspect of "timelessness" features rather prominently in the topical writings of Lu Xun, who is firmly committed to the ideas of the Enlightenment. This principal idea can be seen in the works of artists such as Lin Tianmiao, or Cui Xiuwen, and modifies the virtual avatars of Xiaoyan Fan. These artists' recent interpretations of traditional symbols or magical practice found in the canonical books (e.g., Feng-Shui or the cult of ancestors) runs through all kinds of genres. Beyond all abstract goal setting, the unfathomable inventory of traditional texts encountered in the Chinese classics or opera are teeming with dragons, tigers, and god-men and anthropomorphic and theriomorphic gods—above all Sun Wukong, the monkey king.

When I ask photographic artist Chi Peng in his Beijing studio about the reason for this adoption, he starts to rhapsodise about the Chinese classics. Sun Wukong, whom he chose as an artistic double a couple of years ago, dominates popular culture as a literary iconic figure with his magical power of shapeshifting into 72 different forms. He had already figured in a TV series in the 1980s. In his series *Journey to the West* (2007), Chi

Peng transposes the classic tale into virtual space, taking as a role model compositions of the Song-dynasty, when Wang Shen (1048–1104) was one of the founders of typical Song *Shan Shui* (water-mountain) landscape painting.

Critique of circumstances

Even Chinese *Neo-Pop*, a kind of contemporary *literati* painting, reactivates the old formal patterns – hanging scrolls, hand scrolls, or album sheets. In their allusions to the *literati* style of the past, Wenda Gu, Ai Weiwei, Li Shuang, Liu Wei, Wang Guangyi, Wu Shan Zhuan, Huang Yong Ping or Lu Shengzhong hand out their slashing critique of the state of affairs. Out of thousands of digital images, Yang Yonglian composes vast panoramic landscapes of his home town Shanghai. On his website, he writes: “Under the cover of classical form I criticise our time and society.”

Chi Peng underlines the significance of compositional vigor in his photographs, which he then meticulously retouches digitally. His composition *Now’ing* (2011) follows the laws of central perspective. The scaling of figures steers the beholder’s gaze to the background, where the Forbidden City is towered by a menacingly monumental gorilla. One looks over the shoulder of the artist’s costumed *alter ego* as he confronts the monster shrouded in black billowing clouds. My attempt at framing his work in terms of Western monkey iconography is vehemently rebuffed by the artist: the gorilla embodies the imminent danger the government faces at the crossroads of a precarious political situation. Numerous artists expect nothing less than fractures in the transformation processes of China, in case the reactionary wing of the party is successful in its struggle for political power.

In the 20th century, freedom of Chinese art was curtailed by both revolution and totalitarianism, which still account for the tensions of a new nationalism in the 21st century. China’s particular struggle for remaining a multi-ethnic state, with its more than 200 spoken languages, is hampered by the extremely contradictory discourses of the various traditions. In its attempt to steer its way into the future, waves of politically-ordained concepts of modernisation swept time and again across the country, and they are themselves plagued by contradictions, imposed discontinuities, and revolutions.

Mao fanatically believed in the power of chaos, in accordance with his motto: “Everything under heaven is in utter choas; the situation is excellent.” And, indeed, the Cultural Revolution set up the perfect propaganda machinery complete with ancillary personality cults. Only after having studied the Western avant-garde did artists realise to what extent even Mao’s reforms of language had served the purpose of power and propaganda. Li

Xian Ting, critic and curator of the 'first hour', by now addressed by fellow artists as their Godfather, declares that artists have imitated the past 100 years of Western art history and its variants of Pop, Expressionism, Dada and Conceptual Art as readily as they abandoned them for reviving their own traditions. As in politics, this was initially born from necessity or pragmatism, as summed up in Deng Xioupeng's notorious dictum: "Whether a cat is black or white makes no difference. As long as it catches mice, it is a good cat."

Recollecting the heritage

The appropriation of foreign and, therefore, incomprehensible languages of art has been abandoned only two generations after the Cultural Revolution on the basis of construed myths, social relationships, and practices of everyday life. Today, this is counterbalanced by reflecting upon China's own heritage of figures, such as Zhuangzi (365-290) or Lao-tzu (6th century), who at times are put into service to promote a new nationalism. The texts of these ancient authors, so rich in metaphors, convince the younger generation of Chinese artists that modern art from the West is anything but universal, and that Chinese art tradition needs to be re-read in accord with its own sources. "Western equals modern" is no longer an exclusive option. Then, it is no surprise that, in the face of many diverging currents, Ding Ning, professor at Beijing University, speaks of a "renaissance of tradition".

Luo Zhongli Luo of the Chinese Academy of Contemporary Art declares war against aggravating stereotypes, and sums it all up in the Chinese *Global Times*: "Now the time has come, after a long journey, to look back to our own artists with systematic research and to develop a Chinese history of art." In a similar vein, President Hu Jintao called for contemplation of Chinese history. He warned against the pernicious influences of the West trying to impose its own views on the whole world.

From communism to consumerism

At the same time and under the label of "re-traditionalisation", Chinese art beats all records on the market. Premium prices at art auctions, as in the case of Zhang Xiaogang's triptych *Forever lasting love* (1998) are no longer exceptional. Major Western museums are now showing substantial interest in contemporary Chinese art. From January to April 2012, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has staged a landmark exhibition entitled *Chinese Art in an Age of Revolution: Fu Baoshi (1904-1965)*. While selling for record prices, Fu Baoshi's work is far from being undisputed at home. The trend towards re-traditionalisation was heated up further in the run-up to the Shanghai Contemporary 2012.

At least at 789 Space in Beijing, the commercialisation of this new re-traditionalisation is becoming increasingly part of a lifestyle; and, as at M 50 Art Centre in Shanghai, is catching up with the rest of the world in its radical economisation. It is with little surprise that we then hear that the owner of *Château Mouton Rothschild*, a wine that has reached cult status in China, has contracted painter Xu Lei to design the new 'vintage label' in a 'traditional' way. In China, long waiting lists for buying wine are as common as they are for the purchase of works of contemporary art. The question of whether this commercialisation will eventually be reflected in social discourse may only be answered with reservations.

The benchmarks for the canon of contemporary art are being set as much by the art centres of Shanghai and Beijing and international auction houses as by the annual plans of the communist party to industrialise culture. At the beginnning of the 21st century, it is not only China that has come to a critical point. Now, everywhere a disinterest in serious engagement with art is noticeable. Current economic forces undermine all democratic values and cast their leaden net over all things generating meaning.

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Translated by Axel Fussi.